John Breger Oral History 08-359 1319

JB = John Breger I =Interviewer

I: Are you classified as a horticulturist?

JB: Yes, and an orchardist consultant. I wasn't a professor. I was working for the Government as a soil conservationist, took graduate work at Oregon State and my Masters at Cornell, then I went to work for Start Brothers in research which led right to this work with Mrs. Burbank to record his legacy. He died (Burbank) in 1926 and I started in 1927. They gave me a place up there.

I: Oh, you lived in the house—was it in good condition when you lived there?

JB: It was very liveable; living room, fireplace, bedroom, bath and kitchen, it was home from May,1927 to August,1929 when I went to Pullman Washington as extension horticulturist at Washington State.

I: Are there records of the work you did when you worked for Stark Brothers?

JB: They wanted descriptions and fruit samples with pictures sent back so guess Start Brothers has them all.

I: Are these all gone now?

JB: Only lilacs out there now and short row of them and walnuts. Lilacs were the latest thing Burbank worked on. Things were sent by people who heard Burbank was a collector, breeder and hybridizer , so he received lants from all over the world when he got that reputation of being a plant wizard and plant lover so he introduced a lot of plants that weren't actually originated by him just planted here in a different part of the world than were they had been. I suppose he got his spineless cactus that way. That's why he was never taken too seriously by scientific horticulturists. They looked upon him as a collector and his hybridization wasn't done along scientific lines. He had every kind of plant material species and so forth that had one or two qualities that were good, hoping that out of a large progeny to get the few plants that might be best from all the possible combinations.

I: Almost by accident?

JB: Yes, you get a small percentage out of a large population of the high quality, highly selected male and female – take the best of each.

I: Did Burbank keep records?

JB: Yes, he described a lot of those things, some of these are in his old catalogs everything that he introduced himself. He didn't keep record as much as general records. He made descriptions of plant material we worked with. He didn't keep what scientists call detailed records just general records and made descriptions mainly on

what was introduced in his catalog and in most cases hadn't been introduced. He had selected the best and what he would have picked in the next few years we had no idea, but were the best for us because Start Brothers sold to everyone in the Union, but were tested in other parts of the country because Start Brothers wanted to know what was the best inside and outside of California because there were guarantee restrictions.

I: He needed to know if you can answer some of the questions the Historic Commission has asked.

JB: I have looked over this carefully—first if I'm not a PhD so I'm not a doctor. I'm from South Carolina not North and don't have a title of Professor. This is background material. At that time I was a horticulturist with Stark Brothers, head of the Orchard Department and special Service Department. Special Service Department was set up where we answered letters from growers, problems of what to grow and plant and when to prune, so I wrote a Manual on Orchard Management so it could be sent off and answer specific letters by mail. I sometimes dictated100 letters in one day. The Orchard Research Department dealt with improving the variety list they were selling in fruits and finding new varieties, seeing if they were brand new or mutations or sports that would be better strains of old varieties that already existed. That was just the beginning of the red sport era. There was a red Gravenstein in the area, some red striped red Delicious, some sports would be solid red, showing up in different orchards around here.

I: I got my information from recent survey environmental reports with Dr.Neilson about your title etc. I just copied from the report.

JB: I was living were Trenton University is for the last 38 years. As I told you I was a horticulturist, Plometrist, see fruits are plomety, ___?____ are vegetables, horticulture is flowers, so Plomety is the term usually used. My present title is retired Orchard Consultant as I still work in Mexico and other places but I'm fully retired at present.

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